

GOSSIP FROM SATELLITE BEACH

by  
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Abstract:

A collection of original poetry.

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## To Be

In the first case, our example speaks of the condition of the apple. The apple is green because it has not yet ripened. When the condition of the apple changes, that is, when it has ripened, it will no longer be green, it will be ripe.

In the second case, our example speaks of the essential characteristics of the apple. The apple is green in color. This particular apple remains green even after it has ripened.

## Contents

On Finding That <i>Café Terrace at Night</i> Hangs Above the Stairs at My New House As It Did at My Old House	1
Sundial	2
Dreamcatcher	3
Scenes from Mars Hill Road	4
<i>Blue Nude</i>	8
Cardboard Boxes, Labeled	9
Cabbage Bug	10
Grafted Thing	11
Cupid's Tears	12
Ex-Lover As Marie Antoinette	13
To Eurycleia	14
What to Pass Down	16
Anecdote	17
Ex-Lover As a Stranger in Nina's Café	18
To Be Loved, Thin, Considered Smart	19
Scenes from Last Year	20
Whaling	21
To the Subject of a Nan Goldin Photo, on My Birthday	22
To the Horseshoe Crab	23
During the Summer of My Mother's Sickness, A Minor Heartbreak	24
Spring	26
Gossip from Satellite Beach	27
<i>Let Me See What Spring Is Like</i>	29
Dream Fruits	30
Growth Rings	31
Upon Forgetting Your Birthday	32
Skipping Skeletons	33
Elegy	34
On the Failure of Mutually Beneficial Relationships	35
Herbarium	36
Corner of 10th Ave and 10th Street	41
From Mile Marker 17	42
But Who's Counting	43
On the Radio, at the Museum, in Bed	44

On Finding That *Café Terrace at Night* Hangs Above the Stairs at My New House  
As It Did at My Old House

The painting sits well over flights of stairs,  
landlords agree. And, looking again, here,  
where I have only just arrived; here, where  
I'll climb beneath its frame at least a year,

the stairs are making sense. They're in the brushed-  
up tiers of night-splotched sky, the shutters stained  
with charcoal. They're in the buildings hushed  
in soot, shortening into the dark in trained,

red-eyed rows. In the bumping cobblestone,  
in caps and bonnets of the young and old,  
in tabletops and chairs lined up, alone,  
singing with light—the shape of stairs takes hold.

But then the freak swooping—like me, thirteen,  
down stairs—of the awning, the evergreen.

## Sundial

At eight and ten, my brother and I  
    carried a piece of plywood to the magnolia's top.  
Our shadows followed across the branches. As we unpeeled  
    the young buds, their moist petals split. We tasted  
the yellow curling at the center. Grandpa taught us  
    the bullfrog's singular croak. We moved away.

Grandpa died first, though he was the healthiest. Understanding  
    why didn't help. High school and college done,  
we returned. Midday light across the driveway, the carport,  
    changed bodies. We spoke in private idiom: the tree house,  
the sounds of life in water-hollowed rocks. The leaves under,  
    and, for years, the sheet of wood in the slender limbs.

Twenty million years ago, magnolia flowers grew tough  
    for the dumb mouths of beetles that didn't know pollen  
from petal in the bloom. To drop a tail, to grow  
    a whole new set of limbs. To recognize without need,  
and mistake nothing for love. Memory moves as a shadow moves.  
    It never takes a step, it circles the body all day.

Dreamcatcher

Waking, I heard the world—  
a train blowing its horn  
below the bedroom window—

half through the pulse in your wrist  
and half through a place I dreamed of,  
Georgia winter mornings,

knowing I'd have to wake soon  
and run down to the big kitchen vent  
to warm before the long walk

to the bus stop. This place  
was all pine and hill, and outside  
my understanding of geography.

This morning, I slept half  
in my mother's old trundle bed,  
in the blue-and-white fields

of sheets, dreaming up woods  
where a train crowed itself over hills,  
and half, more than half, wholly

in yours. When I tried  
to explain that unremembered return,  
you touched the small scab we'd made

on my lip. You touched my hair,  
and my neck, and the small red marks  
I didn't yet know you'd left.

## Scenes from Mars Hill Road

### I.

Arms suckered around his ankles, we were octopi: cackling, beaked creatures. We would not let go. He yelled, *fee, fie, foe, fum* and we cried, *let down your long hair!* We slid over the carpet, our reddening bellies smacking on the tile.

~

Weekday mornings: *up and at 'em!* Bedroom, kitchen, driveway, bus. Weekend mornings: his songs at the piano, over and over again. From bed we'd hear the first slow chords, then his right hand. Then, his voice.

~

He never:

1. replaced the upstairs bedroom windows,
2. redid the living room floors (remember the carpet tacks, the hospital),
3. cleaned the back shed.

He never: made a tree house.

~

*My damn boss* loud from the pump.  
Sunbelt granola bars and strawberry YooHoos.  
Squeegeeing, throwing out old receipts.  
Bucket seats in this car: no fighting over the front.  
One straddled the gear shift,  
the other toyed with the vents.  
*Queen* constant. His singing funny,  
then private and gone on too long.

### II.

Our loud voices, our horrible shifting teeth. She groped behind her—Atlanta mornings, driving to daycare—fingers wandering to calm some leg.



~

Bat in the house! She, with the broom;  
us closed in our room.  
'The cowboy's hobbyhorse, the fisher's net,  
the bat. The games we made to play at fear.

~

Burgers on the grill, veggies on the grill; us running with tongs, cups of water, big, big plates.  
Tripping on the way, scraping our knees. Help that didn't help.

~

Remember:  
1. do not put socks in the laundry room inside out  
2. put the silverware—sorted!—in the dishwasher  
3. her birthday. She remembers his.

~

Fleas, heart-worms, in heat, even, but she let us keep it. Some fetch, some tricks, but, mostly:  
calm on the back porch, licking wine from the bottom of mugs. A nighttime we didn't know.

### III.

We screamed down the road-turned-hill on trashcan lids.  
We took food coloring into the yard and made Technicolor snow angels.  
We ate icicles, we used buckets as snowshoes, we fell and felt nothing.

Told to clear snow from the upstairs porch, we  
made men all morning, then pushed them over  
the edge. Remains frozen for days at the  
bottom of the driveway.

~

We tied our last baby teeth  
to the doorknob, had the other  
push the door shut.  
'There's a picture, somewhere:  
him shirtless, punch-drunk, string  
hanging from his mouth,  
the door leashed open.

~

Summer training with grasshoppers.  
in the living room,  
Brought the slow jumpers  
loud enough to make them race  
The daddy long legs,  
not so lucky.  
left the bodies

We strung obstacles  
then took to the high grass in snake boots.  
back inside. Said *start!*  
between coffee tables, stereos, window sills.  
the Japanese beetles —  
We picked the legs off one by one,  
on the sidewalk with the worms, the charred ants.

~

Whispering in the laundry room. Disguised, adult in sequins and sparkles, her going-out clothes. The driveway was long. We made it all the way up, but never—on our own—out.

#### IV.

~

Small intestine pushed  
through stomach lining  
at the same time hairs  
squirmed through skin.  
I noticed in the shower:  
things change slowly, then  
are suddenly changed.  
I didn't tell her for years.  
*For how long?*

~

Caught garter snakes  
in the unused basement bathtub,  
breakneck roller-skating  
around brown pillars,  
the girl's hand  
back under the blanket,  
touching my shoulder.  
*See, it's so cold it feels wet.*  
The snow, settled against  
the low door. The pine limbs,  
cracking in their sheets of ice.

## V.

*It's too graphic, too violent, too sad.* Women crying, explosions, then her jab at the dash. The four of us expanding away from one another. I'd learned to whistle, had spent nights pushing and pulling at air 'til some tone came from it. Tried out the PRI interlude. He *laughed*.

~

He lost his grandmother's ring. She lost her grandmother's mirror. We found the gun at the top of the closet. A saxophone, a Model-T piggy bank, a white lace christening dress.

~

The fig tree  
    a giant for climbing.  
All arms to slide down, fruit  
        behind each leaf-hand.  
Shirtfuls, stomachs full  
        before the kitchen,  
  
        the baking in brown sugar and butter,  
the eating then playing, the forgetting  
        to notice  
the parents' retreat  
        back up the stairs.

~

The rosebushes always with Japanese beetles, the pulled geranium petals we fought down one another's shirts, the trick tree whose petals stank.

The bear that one day walked through all this.

Chins on the window pane, knees in the carpet, we sang to it. We took its paws in our hands and crumpled the herbs' fattest leaves. Hours later, the scent is still on your palms.

*Blue Nude*

after Matisse

You have pencil-scarred knees,  
foot-soles. Bones and flesh round  
as worry-stone. If I took that right arch  
as if to rub clear the sweeping marks,  
you would press into my firm grip.

## Cardboard Boxes, Labeled

The eggshells were weathered to gauze  
when we found them. On brown construction paper—  
tidy with straw and marked with circles—  
we set them.

We went in, to the frank mother,  
the sometimes-submissive father, and their afternoons  
hyphenated with bright angers. Our  
partial discovery—

spring-woken, spring-hidden—we set on the table.  
The morning's dishes, last week's homework, the sprawling  
envelopes with their little,  
hard-edged words

and the conversations,  
the much-mentioned silences  
that, these years distant,  
we've colored in.

Cabbage-Bug

For your markings,  
you are called harlequin,  
calico-back;

for your fury,  
Sherman. You riddle  
greens, you leave only

their spines. When winter  
sends you burrowing,  
I chase you

underground,  
darkening my fingers  
with your insides.

I pull plants one after another,  
by the root, and your eaves  
betray you.

## Grafted Thing

Spring makes an ocean-reflected  
sunrise, a red Rorschach  
of inner thighs. My body

seems to try—blood dried  
dirt-black on a palm—to hold itself in.  
What if orange peel, sepal,

egg shell? The lining,  
useless cauling,  
coming all at once.

How pink can the water run?  
Next week, bleeding done,  
I imagine pain, the difference

between shed and kept flesh.  
I keep pulling amaryllis  
— invisible inheritance —

from the garden. The path  
a rush of bulbs. I keep up my habit:  
the skin in the mouth

comes in long strips, bitten.  
Each night, the skin heals; each day:  
picked to pieces again.

## Cupid's Tears

*One morning Fredrika Bremer looked toward the wall of the apartment, and there, in a long crimson line, the delicate flowers went ascending one by one to the ceiling, and passed from sight. She found that each was borne laboriously onward by a little colorless ant much smaller than itself: the bearer was invisible, but the lovely burdens festooned the wall with beauty.*

—TW Higginson, "The Procession of the Flowers"

I should have watched the flowers lift  
gently to the limit of things,

then come piece by piece  
apart. I should have

seen the petals,  
the small ants

that held them,  
begin their quiet crawl

back to the ground.  
I threw back the sheets.

I set my feet  
on the floor, and they

came down with that  
earliest footfall.



Ex-Lover As Marie Antoinette

Your arm hangs gleaming  
alongside wads of tassled satin dress,  
above hooped and laddered whalebone  
and minute ruched shoe-tips. I have seen

that white  
on your stomach  
and on your thighs.

I have watched, mornings, your breath lift your chest,  
your heart shake it—in part. Now, your skin  
is dimmed with tulle. Your lips  
are a fluke

and its reflection,  
sounding depths I have known.  
Women dab ochre into your cheeks,

smooth your hair streetdust-white  
with lead. They say  
they've draped stolen diamonds

around your neck. They say  
other fingers come  
to unclasp them.

To Eurycleia  
*The Odyssey XIX*

Oh, but who are you,  
in my legs? Who are you, feeling  
what I cannot feel of my skin,  
who might come to know me so well  
that, seeing me,—in disguise and gone  
for years—would exclaim *Yes, yes!*  
*It is you!* Shh.  
I do not know you. I am a stranger  
in my own halls.

Intended to be blank



## What to Pass Down

In the sixties, my grandmother  
    was a flight stewardess and ballroom dancer.  
She told me she loved walking on the gray carpet  
over New York and Miami, giving businessmen  
    and tired vacationers exactly  
    what they wanted: ice or no ice in their small plastic glasses.

She still runs into Eastern Airlines people  
    at places like Olive Garden or the skin doctor's office.  
I was with her, once, buying toilet paper  
and toothpaste at the commissary, listening as she told  
    the stewardess that I'm in school,  
    that I go out dancing every Friday night.

At twenty-eight, the two of them could have stood side-by-side  
    in small heels, watching flight information tick  
    down the overhead board. They could have read  
flight delays and shared drinks in the airport lounge,  
    talking about Biscayne, where the sand  
    is the same color as the sun on top-story windows.

My grandmother had a dancing partner  
    who made her feel like she was living in that sun-glare  
    and who died when they could still dance salsa  
and swing better than anyone in the Bay. Then she married, had children,  
    remarried. They were sitting by a bonfire  
    on the beach when my grandmother told my mom about him, saying

even those years later she could remember  
    how his hand felt on her waist, but not  
    why she'd wanted to dance before she met him.  
I heard the story downstairs, by our brick-set fire.  
    While my Dad slept, Mom told me stories,  
    and I hoped she thought I understood them.

I understand little still. Down the hall, I hear my grandparents  
    talking surgeries and selling the house.  
I overhear coffee-shop chatter: friends about friends.  
Couples argue on the train. If our trails make imperfect parallels  
    in a clear sky, then cross in long, white x's,  
    tell me the crossing is worth the slow widening away.

## Anecdote

On the first day, I took down the curtains. I broke the windows with the standing mirror and let the day in through the window-frames.

On the second day, I regretted the first.

On the third day, I toppled the potted plants and spread the soil across the floor with a comb. I planted the cacti in the sunny spot by the desk and moistened the soil by the door for the ferns.

On the fourth day, I invited silence in. It shifted its weight on the couch. The air conditioner, my pulse, the cars on the street, the neighbors up and down their stairs, the refrigerator, the grandfather clock, my breathing, and the breeze through the window-frames ceased to sound. The ferns waved and my left breast shook and I did not hear.

On the fifth day, I sat with old photographs of my parents and took complaints, which spawned, mosquito-like. Larvae swam in my unwashed water glasses. They curled for sleep beneath my fingernails and on the pillows of my upper arms. They crawled into my ears and demanded to be fed.

On the sixth day, I gave birth to twins: both myself. I gave one to my mother, but but my father said he'd prefer the plants.

On the seventh day I got dressed and went to work.

Ex-Lover As a Stranger in Nina's Café

This place is grand! Outlandish!  
The barista announces orders over an intercom!  
She makes cappuccinos. Look!  
Upstairs, the cook places pad thai  
in a basket and lowers it  
to the counter. *Pad thai!*  
Who are you, coming up the stairs?  
There is snow still melting in your hair!  
You sit a few seats down  
and rub the red marks your socks made  
around your calves.  
Book in one hand, croissant in the other,  
you eat like a heron walks: carefully, carefully.  
The basket goes down its white rope.  
You've broken my heart.  
When you leave, I scoot over  
to your warm seat  
and these new strangers,  
nothing like you.

## To Be Loved, Thin, Considered Smart

The summer I left you, I read my journals to you, my ordinary desires. We had impossible sex—that dying grip. Who knew what one hand could do, the other busy bailing out water. I'd written about Lauren Bailey and Garrett Hollis, those oldest hurts. We cracked each other's knuckles, planned beating Lauren and Garrett bloody. We didn't sleep for fucking. We took back the word *cunt*; we took it from the back. We laughed and laughed.

After I left, you stayed in my head. And out—everyone so tired of hearing it. I'm drunk, I should go home, I should go home *alone*. But—here's something—just remembered: the textures in your leg, armpit, and arm hairs; what you said to help me sleep, those nasalized Spanish vowels. I hadn't known to be scared. I felt better, talking to you. I feel better, talking about you. How to be, when better is brief... Your mom said something, roughly, like, *only the spoon knows the depth of the pot*. Difficult to translate, you said. Was I the pot, or the spoon? Did you know how deep this thing went, how deep it would go?

Scenes from Last Year

When jellyfish wash ashore,  
a sandpiper climbs onto the membrane

—quivering, muddied  
reflection of clouds—

and slips its beak through.  
Memory is a beach.

Downward-gazing,  
comfort-seeking, nostalgia runs

on brittle feet from body  
to body, finding

and cleaving the sleek core  
of its one-colored world.



## Whaling

Gloveless, using one finger,  
I go down the line,  
knocking icicles, one tusk

after another, from the railing:  
peoples' hats, people yelling  
*Ishmael, Ishmael, Ishmael!*

Where is my ocean, my ship;  
where are my shipmates?  
The ice has been melting

on its own. It's spring;  
it's summer again and I'm gleeful.  
I'm slicing new growth

from the old trees, knotting  
the green stems  
and tossing them into the stream.

To the Subject of a Nan Goldin Photo, on My Birthday

Hair still shining wet,  
you have dressed  
and half-sat at the vanity.  
Your reflection is sharp.  
On the table below: eyeliner,  
blush, lipstick.  
The glass from the bottom  
right-hand corner of the mirror  
has cracked and fallen  
(with the mismatched earrings,  
the dirtied q-tips) somewhere  
beneath the table.  
It is 1992. I am born,  
and born again  
in that invisible lens  
turning into focus  
above and behind  
your right shoulder,  
in the shutter that closed  
and caught you.

To the Horseshoe Crab

Your legs stroke the glittering air  
    domed in your ten eyes  
as you belly your gills in the swell. You flip,  
    flaring your shell like feathers  
from your whole, small frame. Molted,  
    you're a fresh, walking skeleton,

a born-again fossil. Do you notice  
    your body's newness,  
or never feel it? Are you surprised when,  
    every two minutes,  
your long heart pounds its blue, copper blood  
    around the corners of your joints?

Tell me, a child again at these banks, surprised  
    again at your weight  
of four hundred million years: where  
    in your alien body do you carry  
memory, returning here each year to sink claws  
and eggs into the natal sand?

## During the Summer of My Mother's Sickness, a Minor Heartbreak

1. Each day burned down like a wick, wax melting around it. I was a teacher. The weeks were empty, the weekends contained small chores: buy toilet paper, wash the sheets, call relatives. Hanging up, I wiped the phone on my stomach, imagined the dampness of someone else's sweat.
2. N and I are in different departments, but we take classes in the same building. She writes papers on masturbation in Milton. She waits a long time to text back. For every day that she waits to respond, I wait an hour.
3. I spend entire days in the kitchen. I bake layered strawberry cake with whipped icing; double batches of lemon cookies, bits of lemon rind candied inside; banana bread for a friend who lets me stay in her Brooklyn apartment for the 4th; Easter wreaths; Danish pastries. The pastries are the most difficult. By the time I get to the last strip of dough, the butter is melting onto the table, and I'm surrounded by what I've palmed into shape: coxcombs, pinwheels, crossovers, cornucopias.
4. It's surprising how much I still want to please my mom. I set the pastries on a checked towel in front of the window, send her the pictures. She is pleased, and suggests that I attend a state fair. A week later I am sitting on the curb with her in Florida, eating the last two pastries. She feels bugs crawling beneath her skin. In an old picture, we are sitting at the beach. We are both looking at the camera as though surprised, and my hand reaches out just behind me, to her thigh.
5. We had been sitting on the pool deck waiting for her to come back with snacks. "How do you spell hot?" my brother asked. I dipped a finger in the water and spelled it out on the concrete, crossing the "t" with sweat that was dripping from my temples. Mom came out with sliced PBJs and milk, and my brother bragged, "I know how to spell 'hot.'" Mom fingered the curls at the base of his neck, then wiped his sweat onto her forearm. The moisture dried quickly on her skin, leaving an arc that shone in a certain light, though you could only see it if you knew it was there.
6. Eight years after our family dog died, I found her hair sticking from the cuff of an old dress. The dress fit me differently than it had when I was in high school, when she and I would sit on the lawn and watch the neighbors walk by. I went to college, left my mom to her. When the dog dies, I visit and find a small shrine above her empty food and water bowls: her collar, a favorite toy, a clipping of her hair.
7. As the rain slowed, it was time to go. N talked a bit longer, about the wallpaper that was peeling in her living room, about the other wallpaper it revealed: grapevines curling to the ceiling. Then she stood, walked to the front door. We didn't kiss. On my way home, I thought of her walking down the hall, between walls wired with vines, switching off the lights as she went.
8. I danced with her the other night at some monthly dance party put on by the Lithuanian Association, but not until I'd had six drinks. When I arrived, a stranger stepped from the crowd and twirled me around — twice — but even then, I was too nervous to dance. I went

up to her, then back to the bar. I danced with her eventually, though, and in a way that, next day, had me moving from couch to bed to desk, not knowing how I'd gotten to any of them. I knew the crescent of her back and shoulders, that I had brushed my lips across her hair, bit her neck.

9. Though it's July, I wake up early to make Easter wreaths. I mix the ingredients and knead the flour, then set it above the fridge to rise. Two more times it needs to rise, so I do laundry, folding the shirt and dress sleeves across the front, so each garment looks like just a rectangle of patterned fabric. I divide the dough into nine long strips, then braid them into three separate wreaths, setting an egg in the middle of each. When Mom wakes up, we eat them on the back patio, where she stays to keep the bugs outdoors. The flour dries into cement on the sink, the mixing bowls, the counter.

10. When mom came into the hotel bathroom and found me looking at myself in the mirror, she made some comment about *boobies*... I was 14. What word is right for a girl's body, growing out of the need for her mother's? At home, there were no mirrors clean enough of childhood in which to imagine breasts. She left the room, taking the knowledge I did not yet carry, the body I was beginning to.

11. *What if the sun never came up?* N asked when we moved to the shady side of the park. On Sunday mornings she brings the child she watches and I walk over to meet her. I live nearby so it's a short walk. I like to see how affectionate the child is towards her. She swings him up in the air and he laughs, trusting her wholly. I thought it was a stupid question, but didn't answer her, just said *hmm* like I always do to avoid saying something stupid. She answered on her own: *on the first day it would be devastating.*

12. At the park again, we sat in the grass. She crushed the driest leaves into dust. I traced a bruise on my thigh. She worked the hair on the nape of her neck in circles. The child played with a swing, sitting underneath and pushing it back and forth over his head. We sat still. She might have thought, *one of us will have to do something.* I thought about reaching over to twirl her hair, about her hands through mine.

13. When she was finally, desolately alone — divorced, living among our empty rooms — bugs came indoors. First they inhabited the baseboards and furniture, then her body. Fiberglass under the skin, each cuticle a hangnail. Small worms circling her wrist. She pulled them out as she was told not to.

14. When rejects me, I go to the bathroom and pinch at every raised spot on my face. As though, if I were thorough enough, I could expel the parts of me that she didn't like. As though either of us knew how to identify them.

15. The last day in Florida, I fall asleep itching at my back. I wake up early and go to the beach, where I find a skull I can't identify. It has a round head and a row of curved, sharp teeth all the way to the back of its jaw. Flies are busy at its base, where the flesh is still only partially decomposed.

Spring

*after Millay*

Green halo of new growth surrounds  
the trees, while shoots, italic seeds,  
lisp through the soil, pronounce  
themselves: tomatoes, peppers, beets.  
Eager, at first, and indistinct  
as babies' teeth, as pawns, they're queened,  
now, crowned. Their roots are in D-1.  
They've got their thumb-grubs in the loam;  
they've got their little tight handhold  
on their little square plot. She comes  
babbling, with flowers. Throwing crumbs  
for birds and squirrels, old fool's-gold,  
idiot April plunges her wet hands,  
her bright grin—into these bare sands.

## Gossip from Satellite Beach

The old military housing  
at Patrick Air Force Base  
was scheduled for demolition,  
but still stands, rented  
dirt cheap to civilians.

Across the retention pond  
where anhingas perch to sun  
and ibises stalk minnows,  
the terra-cotta roofs  
of the new houses shine  
red and gold at noon.

On the sand trail between  
the two neighborhoods,  
a walker leans, picking  
sand-spurs from her dog's  
upturned paw, and children  
bike, or lug their bikes  
back home with flats. Closer  
to the beach, reasonably sized,  
palm-wooded, the older  
homes were better. Three  
of the blue ones had been ours  
for a lease or two.

The headlights driving  
north or south, the heat,  
the breaking waves helped  
us to sleep. The dog turned  
her head at the rats in the walls,  
watched the roaches and licked  
her paw. The east-facing,  
wallpapered kitchens kept  
the moon. We left. Things  
might have changed. The surfers  
bob like lures and the tide  
laps up and down the shore,  
which slips away. Tourists  
limp carwards with  
their plastic bags of shells.  
The lumpy dunes are gray.

Intended to be blank



*Let Me See What Spring Is Like*

Dawn Sunday morning, I pulled  
new sprouts: seeds I'd dropped  
a week earlier, too close together,

stems now falling over themselves  
for sun. Kneeling, I dug elbow-deep  
for an unknown taproot

set by some other, better gardener.  
The sun's warming arm slipped  
across my back, a neighbor's window

slid open, a sudden trumpet sang  
*in other words...* and I straightened,  
surprised I was not alone.

## Dream Fruits

I am surrounded,  
calm. Nimble-fingered,  
I know there is a source,  
a problem,  
and a solution  
in each pried-at thing.  
I thumb the peel off,  
then the flesh,  
leave it all glistening  
around me.  
I crack open the seeds  
and they burst,  
one after another,  
into flower.  
Pistils unfurl  
from their hold  
and worms and moths  
swarm down, eager  
to be known.

## Growth Rings

Kindergarten, we passed  
a slice of oak around the table.  
We thumbed sweat across  
a summer's drought or winter's frost,  
across the oakworm fall.

The leaves from the backyard trees  
hid the thrown horseshoes  
and scared the dog, who one day  
crawled to my dad's *get over here,*  
*come!* and licked his boots.

Mom said, later, she recognized  
herself in that, and had to leave.  
We moved south, forgot  
the ambered tree-tips, the shade's  
slow descent to the lowest limbs.

Waves broke for miles up  
the coast. Pelicans winked  
and stole our baitfish. Mom sees  
Dad's face in ours,  
and he, what isn't his.

Somewhere, there's a memory free  
of its angers, as when, years later,  
chopping carrots, I saw  
those rings again, then  
my own hands circling

the years, my hands punching  
leaves into a bag, returning  
helicopter seedpods to the air,  
knowing, unsurprised,  
the expanse a body can hold.

## Upon Forgetting Your Birthday

The patches sewn in wide-stitched threads  
across your denim vest; the pen,  
the needle, and the ink; the Docs  
that skinned your ankles, breaking in;

the nails that never grew; the joke  
of biting down all ten of mine;  
the names of plants that you forgot;  
the Spanish that I didn't learn;

the way you had with nicknames (not  
with names); the names you made for me  
and for your jealousies; those eyes;  
the cat I left with you when I

moved North; the hours of talking, then  
the less-than-hours; the coming home  
alone; the texts; the drunken calls  
to you and not to you; this poem;

the way we fucked that time of month;  
the time we rolled into a ball  
(my clotted blood, your fingertips)  
and spent, to have the other whole.

*Skipping Skeletons*

The day after we danced for the first time,  
my desire sent the scissors from the desk.  
It set my phone ringing. It threw open  
my windows and forced the door.  
It started my period. It started  
my roommates' periods. When I tried  
to use the microwave, the circuits blew.  
I went down to the basement to flip the breaker:  
water was everywhere. The clothes  
in the wash were mangled. Going up the stairs,  
my socks slipped on every step.  
A new scar rose like a tooth  
on the knuckle of my index finger.  
A new painting appeared on the wall  
above my dresser: skeletons with huge strides  
across a field of flowers. I am  
scared to leave the house. An earthquake  
every time I check the weather.  
I haven't seen you in a while. I'd like to.

## Elegy

My aunt is most proud of her summer hummingbirds and her dog grooming: she's been doing it thirty years. She has a shop in the back where I learned how to run a razor down a dog's flank, how to hold its muzzle and hide my fear.

Aunt Lynn's favorite lies: my first word was dog and once I said I wished she was my mom. She always told the ladies in the grocery store I was hers, and they almost died over our shared blue eyes.

Times she had a boyfriend, he took us to the fair and complained about the dogs. There were probably too many dogs. I slept with paws pressing into my arms and twitching in dreams at my feet. I played dog, I prayed for dogs, I paid attention to my brother long enough to collaborate on poster-board presentations for my parents, each week campaigning for a different dog.

At school, during recess, I stayed in the classroom. My grandma said, girls don't make friends with smart girls. My aunt said, no, girls don't make friends with pretty girls.

Listening to Mac DeMarco, I delete all my old voicemails. When I get to May, I remember that you showed me his music. I delete the voicemails you left, one after another, that month. The guitar, a drunk surprised she's still standing, babbles through three tracks before I'm done.

Aunt Lynn asks about boys—or girls?—and I say, no. I don't remember how to want to talk to her. Instead, I pull some plant from the bathroom sink and kill gnats. Gammy took the clock down to get it fixed, but it's still down, still broken. The wood that was beneath it is pale as the skin beneath a bathing suit.

The old dogs are buried in the pecan grove. When I learned that pecans grew on those trees, Gammy showed me how to recognize the wormholes in the shell and told me, because of them, the meat's sour before it hits the ground.

We were planting tomatoes when she told me about her miscarriages. That last time, she'd made it to three months before she felt her familiar pain, then flushed the thing as she had the rest.

After her husband dies, Gammy has me sleep in his place, where I dream of sex.

Instead of talking to my aunt, I listen again to her story about Led Zep in Atlanta in 1973. I show her how to get Gammy off the ground when she falls: a 24-pack of Coke cans, then the stepladder.

We sit on the wicker furniture, playing rummy for so long the hummingbirds grow bold. On the hottest days, we count more than ten in the yard at a time. If we were quick enough, and gentle, we might touch them.

## On the Failure of Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Inside some fig flowers there is a small passage for the female wasp.  
She climbs in, legs shedding pollen, to lay her eggs.

The fruit pinkens around them as they grow.

When the eggs hatch, the son eats his way out of the fruit.  
Toothless, the daughter follows.

Some fig flowers have a false passage. So narrow  
her wings come off. Narrower,  
and she can't move.

That first fig of the season, that second fig,  
you can't even taste her.

## Herbarium

### *Knotweed*

While talking to my dad, miles south, I remember pulling pine needles apart, trying to predict which thread would give first. He said, *don't tell her that, she'll get vain*. He said, *she's easy to entertain*. You grow in the small patches of yards along my street—My dad's voice is brassy in the phone. I nod, pinching my thumbnail and my fingernail down your green stem, loosing each pink bead across the cement.

### *Zenia*

My mom's mispronunciation of Zinnia. How my father might have spoken of my mother: using a name, but failing to name the thing. In an old photo, he looks at her (pregnant). I'd like to go back. To hear the words—*Erin—Mother—wife*—in his mouth.

### *Iris: Species Names*

Sun Doll    Jewell Baby Candy Apple    Little Showoff  
                    Baby Blessed                      Cherry Garden—  
                    although I do not believe that her voice, her gaze did not also break.

### *Celosia*

You are the whole bouquet on one thin stem;  
                    a yellow, orange, and red child-rendered flame;

coral that floats in air; the heavy brain  
and curving spine; the flesh that frills between  
                    my thighs; an angelfish's dorsal fin;

a church's steeple worshipping the sun;  
                    a grin; a weird and schema-shifting thing.

You are ready and possible as ink.  
Dense with associations, yet yourself.  
                    Soon enough scentless, and enough.



*Jasmine: Species Names*

yellow summer	forest princess
royal needle-flower	starry-wild
red blue-grape star	common

*Lantana*

He planted you for butterflies, and in the summer their wings flame around you. Winter, he pruned you back, and your whole body calloused over.

*Oleander*

Larger than a shrub, but not tree-sized or tree-shaped, you have grown in my grandmother's yard for years. Trimming you, I imagine a child outgrowing the sink, learning, against her mother's thighs, how to shower. I imagine pulling splinters, combing for lice, and drop your limbs among the new-sprouting stems.

*Yellowcress, Given to Me by a Friend*

She says the inner arm is soothing because it's what we look at in the womb.  
She pulls you up, shakes the dirt free.  
I remember water falling from dark tassels of hair.

Memory is womb and child, it is the poem it writes.  
We carry bouquets like infants across our arms.

*Queen Anne's Lace*

In elementary school, you are clipped, placed in a bowl of dyed-red water. We watch you blush. The lesson is capillary action, how water flows against gravity. It's easy to take on another's shame. You are a hand held out to dance. We are making you into a corsage.

*Girl Scout Troop 98 Dissects the Pitcher Plant*

When one girl finds  
a blue-tailed skink,  
we surround you to see

what miscarriages are possible—  
until the entomologist  
takes us to the chrysalises

while our mothers clean you  
from the room.

*Undergrowth*

You like questions you can answer *yes* to. Take the old bread down to the fish. Run up to the mailbox. You like hours on hours of shadow.

*Forget-Me-Not: Species Names*

broadleaf	scorpion grass	changing	field
creeping	true	spring	

*Florida Yellowcress*

You followed her from Miami to Gainesville, blooming from the rain-watered fire-pit in the backyard. The only plant she cared to recognize, you grew as though for her. When homesick, she fell asleep to Mexican soap operas. I moved away. You grow everywhere, nearly, despite the name.

*Water Lily*

Where the pond skaters' legs meet the water,  
a small pool of air is proof of their weight.  
You can't feel it when they start across your skin.  
Days pass, opening and closing.  
The wind pushes you into this or that path.

*Echinacea, Dried, in the Mailbox*

A forwarding address,  
plastic ceiling-stars,  
and a bottle of bourbon, hidden.

*Black-Eyed Susan Patch, in the Coming Mornings*

Adapted to a neighbor's morning walk,     someone wakes, and pulls on pants, a shirt  
and strains to hear that whistle go             around the corner, down the street.

*Portrait Under the Holly*

From every Christmas we smile in our matching sweaters: the red in your leaves, and your  
green leaves, and the gold leaves on the ground, and the red, the green.

*Moonflower During an Eclipse*

Everything is rust-colored, ash-dim.  
The red clouds touch only me.

A waxing swift as this  
is hard to remember. The waning,

I recall. I am larger than I could ever  
have believed, larger than belief.

In twenty years I'll be lucky, and get another  
  
one, get one other  
night like this.

*Dahlia*

Dawn, afternoon, and night, your petals like funnels gather the sky-washings.

*Sunflower*

you turn on your tall stalk                      you grow upward  
you make a helix                      you'll unmake in the morning  
                 and halt one day at full height                      facing east  
learning by observation when and where it's safe  
   to place your faith

*Rose*

Articles, indefinite: a fruitful complication, an uneasy epiphany. And, definite: the turn.

*Gerber Daisy*

Fake flowers in Easter baskets; fake eggs in the grandparents' yard. We match in bragging photographs. Years later, bouquets everywhere, Mom attends Dad's father's funeral. She gets the four of us together—each with a can from the opened 24-pack of Natty Light. Dad leaves; we finish it off.

Corner of 10th Ave and 10th Street

I knew it would rain, but I came  
anyway—no bag, no umbrella.

The lemons were, as they are  
every season, big as oranges.

Here's where we went  
after our first night, where

you poured seeds like milk  
into the ground, growing forests of sprouts,

where you pulled one carrot, and then,  
in disbelief, all of them.

The rain that had started, stopped.  
The lemons I'd picked, I left.

FROM MILE MARKER 17

When shapes—the curving lane,  
the lines of trees—are born  
and die and come again  
in the next rare light, and when

the slowing drivers lean  
over their wheels, confusion  
returning, then—now-then-  
soon-when?—*then*, the answer—

unreasoning, rises—or—  
materializes.

## But Who's Counting

It never happens any other way than this.  
The inner cold and outer heat,  
the big possible  
of another. Be careful. Be, heart,  
thick, better, immense. There's no excuse  
for this same mistake, and so often.

On the Radio, At the Museum, In Bed

You hear the conductor's  
soft breath, and notice  
the syncopation in the violins.

You find the sheen of dust  
on the statue's glass case,  
and can't see the figure without it.

You know how to recognize  
that new self-consciousness,  
that shut-lipped, slit-eyed shame.

The wind—quick, affectionate,  
careless—no longer  
sounds in the trees, and laundry

falls limp on the line.  
Take down those hung clothes.  
Dress in them.



Biographical Statement:

Jessica Hudgins was born in 1992 in Athens, GA. She graduated from the University of Florida, where she studied under William Logan and Michael Hofmann. Her poems appear in *The Journal*, *Glassworks*, and *Portland Review*. She lives and teaches in Baltimore.